

My Personal Learning Experience (My PLE)

RELEVANT CONTENT | SOCIAL LEARNING | IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

ABSTRACT

We go to school. Although we all know how fortunate we are to get education, we all had our bad experiences: teachers going too fast, teachers going too slow, boring/irrelevant topics that you know you will never use.

Most schools use technology, if only to teach technology. With some luck you can go to a virtual class or an on-line collaborative project with your co-students. But you still have to go to school. Once you graduate and join the workforce, your employer will have lots of learning technologies ensuring that you go to your new corporate 'school'.

This paper is about school coming to you. Any school: primary school, university, high school, professional accreditation, secondary school, college, corporate university or adult learning program. The way we will do this is not by merely putting stuff on-line but by really thinking first about students. The aim is to be truly learner-centric.

The idea of Personal Learning Environments has been around for more than a decade. The pioneers were right: students need to take control of their own learning and do this in their own personal way. However, not all of us are technologically savvy enough to set up a hyper-personal learning environment using all kinds of state-of-the-art widgets. Not all learners want to be pedagogues. Some want to be policemen, others statisticians and still others want to be experts on the early days of movies.

This paper describes how our concept of 'My Personal Learning Experience' (My PLE) has been designed to make education all about you. We also describe how it enables schools to design and provide learning as a true service. In reading this paper we hope you see it our way: because learning is about the learners and not the teachers we want to put the learner in control.

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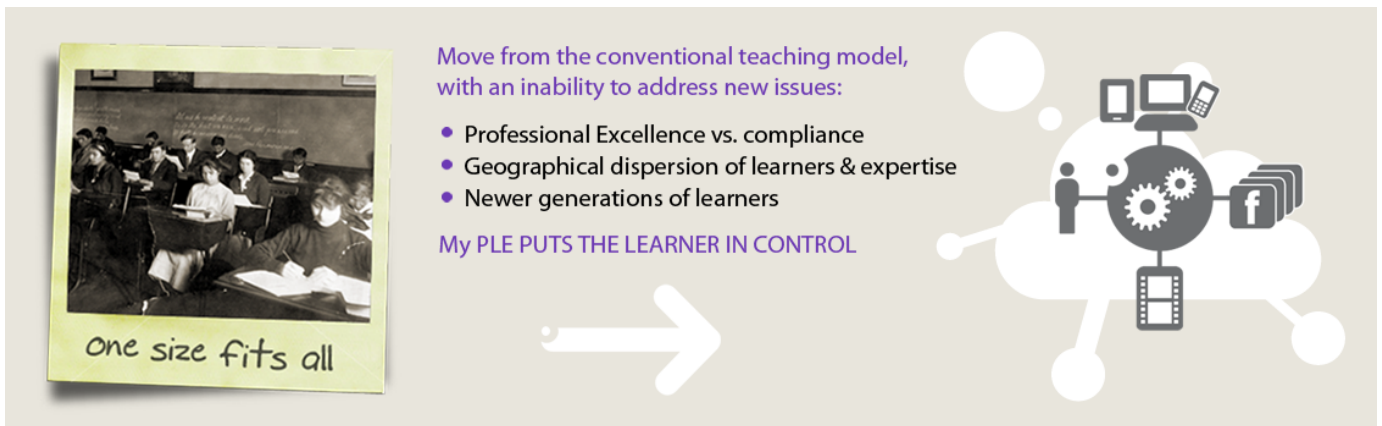
1. Why a Personal Learning Experience?

This is the problem we set out to solve: to build an environment which provides learners their very own Personal Learning Experience without requiring them to configure their own options. Because learning should be a service, we have aimed to provide learning truly as a service. My Personal Learning Experience will not replace schools, but will enable them to come to you, wherever you are, whomever you are and however you prefer to learn.

No, we didn't start out this project with all these lofty goals. Our destination has unveiled itself only gradually over the past year. What we (as a corporate learning organization) started with were problems and frustrations. Frustrations with learning platforms that required more training rather than enabling more learning. Problems with the intrinsically elitist nature of corporate training where companies can only afford to offer development to the already well developed. Frustrations about the enormous cost and ecological footprint of learning with all its flying and time away from home. And finally problems with the one-size-fits-all nature of training and its inability to go beyond mere compliance - to allow learners to build new areas of excellence.

My Personal Learning Experience (My PLE) was built to address real-life problems and frustrations . Below we give the initial slides with which we started the journey.

Figure 1. Learning Breakthrough



But as with any interesting journey, the starting point was just that: the starting point. We soon found out that My PLE affords an essentially better learning experience all around by putting learners in control instead of forcing them down predetermined learning paths.

In the next chapters we describe the key concepts we discovered in taking our personal journey from our real-life problems to the definition of 'My Personal Learning Experience' with its novel concepts and its lofty goals. It is just a start, every day we work on it we see new possibilities so stay tuned .

2. What is 'My Personal Learning Experience'?

It starts with considering what is personal ...after all, learning, by definition goes beyond the merely personal. Learning is about aspiring to excel and being recognized for what you know, for instance by peers as part of their community of excellence.

That is a key word: community: to learn is to become part of a community. The personal in My Personal Learning Experience is choosing which community you want to become a part of and how to prove you belong in it. It is not the type of personal that allows you to have things your own way. It is the type that considers your personality to be a composite of identities, each associated with a social group or a community.

The first basic concept to be captured by a personal learning experience: membership (or aspiration to obtain membership) in a variety of communities and, consequently, progress made with respect to those memberships. Progress is another key word because in a true community nobody cares how you arrived there, as long as you have proven worthy to be there. Learning can therefore not be about completing a set of predefined steps. The most impersonal learning experience is the "one-size-fits-all" method: read page X, launch e-learning Y, then register for class Z, if you make it through you receive your credits.

This is an understandable form of learning when teaching resources are scarce and need to be optimized. It is understandable, but it is highly impersonal nonetheless.

The second basic concept to flow from communities in a personal learning experience is contributing to the group's progress. It is not enough only to be concerned with one's individual standing. It is to co-decide what is relevant for the group and what are the up-to-date expectations the community has of its members. Communities, unlike traditional certifications, are not static, not even for a couple of years. A truly personal learning experience is one where you feel like you contribute to the development of the learning track as an example. As part of the community, you are the expert.

A third basic concept within the community is communication, any community is first and foremost about communication. If we restrict communication to a happy few that can go physically to the same place, only those few can be happy. If sharing of information within a community is restricted by the physical moving around of community members we remain in a situation which is deplorably suboptimal. Instead, what we need is real communication without having real co-location, we need to improve information fluidity. We need virtual communication that is better than being there allowing community members to be as immersed when interacting on-line as in-person as part of the same college or research group.

Personal learning is achieved when learning and collaboration are one experience.

So, from personal we connect to communities. Communities imply membership which in turn gets us into the notion of proving progress. We also have contributing to the community's excellence or, in short, social learning. Finally, we have immersive communication. Tie all of this together with mobility (anywhere, anytime, from any device) and you get My Personal Learning Experience (My PLE).

Figure2. Communities in a Personal Learning Experience



3. How is My PLE Relevant to Students?

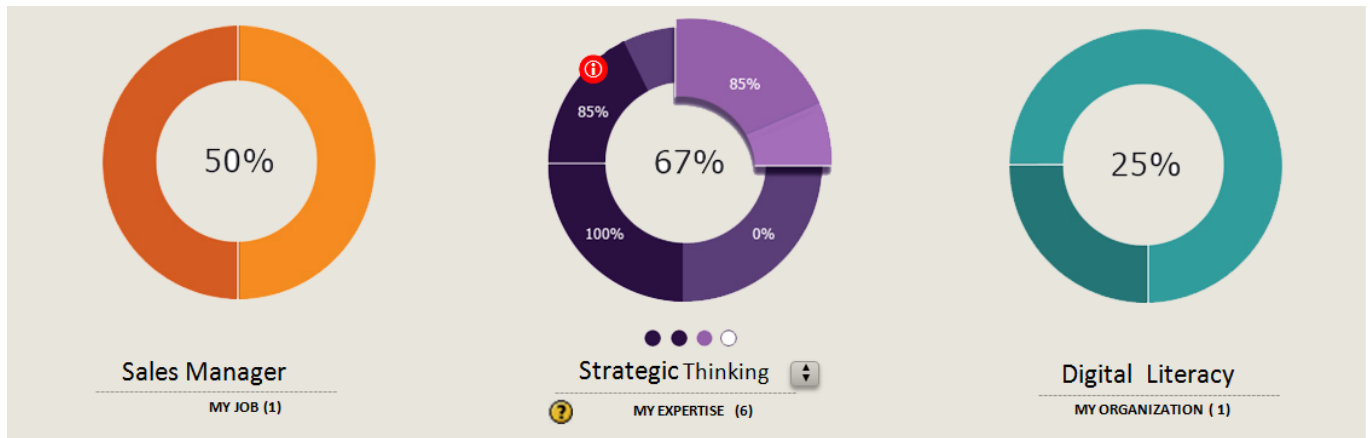
Students log in and, through the magic of software see their personal learning dashboard consisting of the communities they aspire to join and the progress they have made in each. People like games, particularly those in which they can only win or make progress, and the personal learning dashboard is like a game board on which each student can track their achievements and plan their next moves. The basic prize is to be recognized as part of a community (badges, ribbons, progression to the next proficiency level, etc.) and be able to shape their own future as well as that of their communities. Students will become teachers of sorts creating their own lesson plan and contributing to that of the community.

Once in the dashboard students can do two things: explore a community or search for other communities.

3.1 Exploring Communities for relevant items

Suppose a student sees that her progress in one of her communities is less than what she wants it to be (because she feels personally challenged to be an expert, or knows that expertise in this community as communication manager is going to be crucial for her job interview the next day), or she wants to be up to date by learning about the new literacies. She clicks the progress counter, which expands into a set of topics that the community deems relevant to know or requires its members to prove competence in. She'll see what's relevant in this community and she will see her personal progress against each of these items. In other words, she sees her strengths and weaknesses in the eyes of her community peers.

Figure 3. Communities and Progress Counters



Deeper into the dashboard, the student will be able to identify specific learning objects she wants to improve on or start to address. Then she encounters something absolutely crucial: learning objects are more than just training material. Each has two aspects to it: proof of competence and learning material. The student can make a personal decision whether to give proof of competence or launch different learning events. In fact, a key idea of the personal learning experience is that there is interplay between the proof of competence and the learning material. Attempting to prove her competence will highlight her strengths and weaknesses in a particular field and will allow her personal learning experience to suggest the most relevant pieces of learning objects. After completing this learning material she will be able to prove to herself whether she ‘got it’ and can decide whether more in-depth study is needed.

Figure 4. Example of learning objects and suggestions in an “Open Communication” Community

The screenshot shows the 'Open Communication Community' dashboard. At the top, there's a header with the community name, a star rating (3 stars), and a dropdown menu. On the right, there's a circular progress indicator showing '85%' and '45 members'. Below the header, there are two tabs: 'Explore and Learn' and 'Collaborate and Share'. The main content area is titled 'Influencing People' with a star rating (3 stars) and a 'Prove it' button. Underneath, there's a 'Suggested Learning' section with a note: 'Choose your learning method: The standard learning method - "Learn it" or take a test that will evaluate your competency - "Prove it". The competency test will recommend what you should learn next - "Suggested Learning".' Below this is a table of learning objects.

| Type | Learning Objects | Learning Status | POC Status | POC Score |
|------|---|---|------------|---|
| 🔒 | Communication is a Two Way Process ★★★★ (18) | In Progress Learn it | 0 | Not Started Prove it |
| 🔒 | Higher Purpose Listening ★★★★ (18) | Not Started Learn it | 0 | Not started Prove it |
| 🔒 | Introduction to Communication ★★★★ (18) | Completed Learn it | 25 | Failed Prove it |

3.2 Searching for Relevant Communities

Turning to searching communities, we luckily can't build software to look into a student's head to determine whether she wants to do a new job, became bored with heavy metal and is now into swing jazz or simply wants to test herself in the latest fashionable topic. We allow the student to personalize her experience by adding communities to which she wants to belong. She will be able to browse and search other existing communities and add them to her dashboard.

There will be other features for students but none of them are particularly interesting beyond providing the expected standards required for any modern web application as well as the hooks and links to social, immersive and relevance technologies. We will make one (1) exception: while we cannot look in the learner's head, we can look in some other applications to know which job she is performing now, which career goals she expressed, or who she is following. Using such data allows us to personalize without asking students to fill in form after form before she can start anything.

3.3 The Personal Learning “Backpack”

There is one key notion implicit in all of the above which deserves mention: the personal learning backpack. Communities will overlap in expectations and proof of competence records can reside in other systems (we neither want to boil the ocean nor rule the world).

One example of the first case is a community about the history of non-classical music relevant to members of both the heavy metal and swing jazz communities. Assuming our student is a recognized member of the heavy metal community, it implies she is also recognized as a member of the history of non-classical music community. This in turn means that if she adds the swing jazz community to her dashboard she will not start from zero, as the progress she made in the history of non-classical music is in her backpack.

This principle, by the way, will also avoid that both the swing jazz and the heavy metal communities have to develop separately their excellence in the history of the non-classical music because that is done in “the history of non-classical music”-community. Division of labour is an important characteristic to achieve scalability (also, this is how education has worked for...ever).

An example of the second case is that our student has completed a certification and the record of her success resides in another system. If her community defines that record as relevant to it, My PLE will retrieve that record and automatically report the corresponding progress. If multiple communities define that record as relevant, she'll see she has made progress in more than one community.

The concept of the backpack works the other way as well. If a community decides that something is now obsolete or something new has become relevant, the individual's progress will go down. This is as it should be, as a community is not static: they live and develop. If individuals stand still, then they can no longer be seen as members.

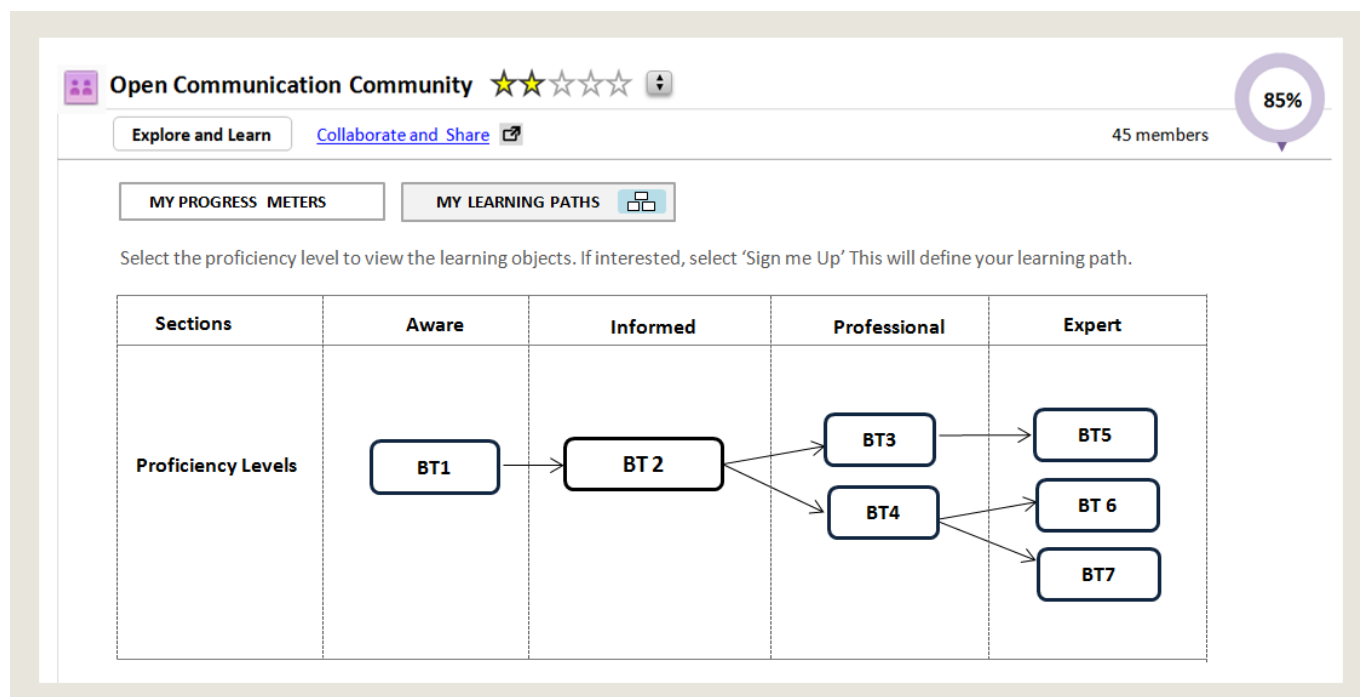
4. How is My PLE Relevant to Communities?

In My PLE, a community is defined as the set of people who are able to speak the same language or aspire to do so. As languages are living things, so too are communities. This is the starting point. Everything we do within My Personal Learning Experience has to be benchmarked against this simple definition and its simple consequence.

In the so-called back-end of My PLE, community managers or spokespersons will determine what common language expectations define a community. They will be allowed to define proficiency levels within that community because learning a language and being part of a community is not black and white. You have people who speak the basics of a language (e.g. mathematics) and those who are experts that make the language live and invent new concepts. Each community has subcultures and it is important to recognize that while they form a whole, they also allow differentiation.

Once proficiency levels are defined, a community manager will be able to express the key items students need to prove in order to make progress in the community. These become proofs of competence defined to capture the (language) expectations of the community. If students prove their competence then they are a recognized part of the community and can progress to higher proficiency levels of that community. As they progress through the proficiency levels, they will be recognized as one of the few people who not only are able to speak in the community but are proficient enough to speak for the community and - ultimately - as those who allow the community to speak better (increase the expressive power of the community's language).

Figure 5. Proficiency levels tree



Thus far, the focus has been on proving competence because that is where communities and memberships start. But this is not where it ends.

The community manager will be able to associate learning objects to the various proofs of competence, helping individuals to identify further reading in their areas of strength and resources with which they can tackle their weaknesses. The learning objects, the proof of competence and the suggested next learning is where the back-end and the front-end (to introduce a synonym for the personal learning dashboard) meet.

Once the individuals making up a community have been characterized (differentiated in subcultures or not) they will be able to create, as peers, a dynamic of helping themselves on old and new issues as well as new areas of excellence. Also, they will be able to start up virtual working groups to explore things that are important for the community.

There are three properties that deserve some closer inspection when talking about communities. They are described in the next sections.

4.1 Communities Are Dynamic

As said above, by their essence communities are dynamic, which means that the set of proficiency levels, proofs of competence and learning objects cannot be static. In other words, to be part of a community means to track it and its expectations over time.

A member of a community can have an almost complete progress indicator and still wake up the next morning logging into My PLE to find out that some of what he knew is no longer deemed relevant by the community or that something he doesn't yet know has been included as relevant. The learner explores why his progress went down. Through his personal learning dashboard he'll identify those learning resources that can bring him up to speed again.

Learning is a continuous process. This implies that community spokespersons should not get too hung up on being complete or absolutely correct, as changes in expectations and progressive insight are part and parcel of a community.

This dynamic is not only about going back in progress. There will be happy occasions for the student where something she already knows has been deemed relevant by one of his communities. In this case, her progress will be in her backpack and he will wake up with a dose of new energy seeing she made progress because she did something pro-actively.

4.2 Communities Are Not Isolated

Let's re-examine the notion of backpack on the side of communities. Communities don't live in splendid isolation. If your community relies on all its members knowing a thing or two about some basic material, then it needs to be able to be imported rather than re-invented.

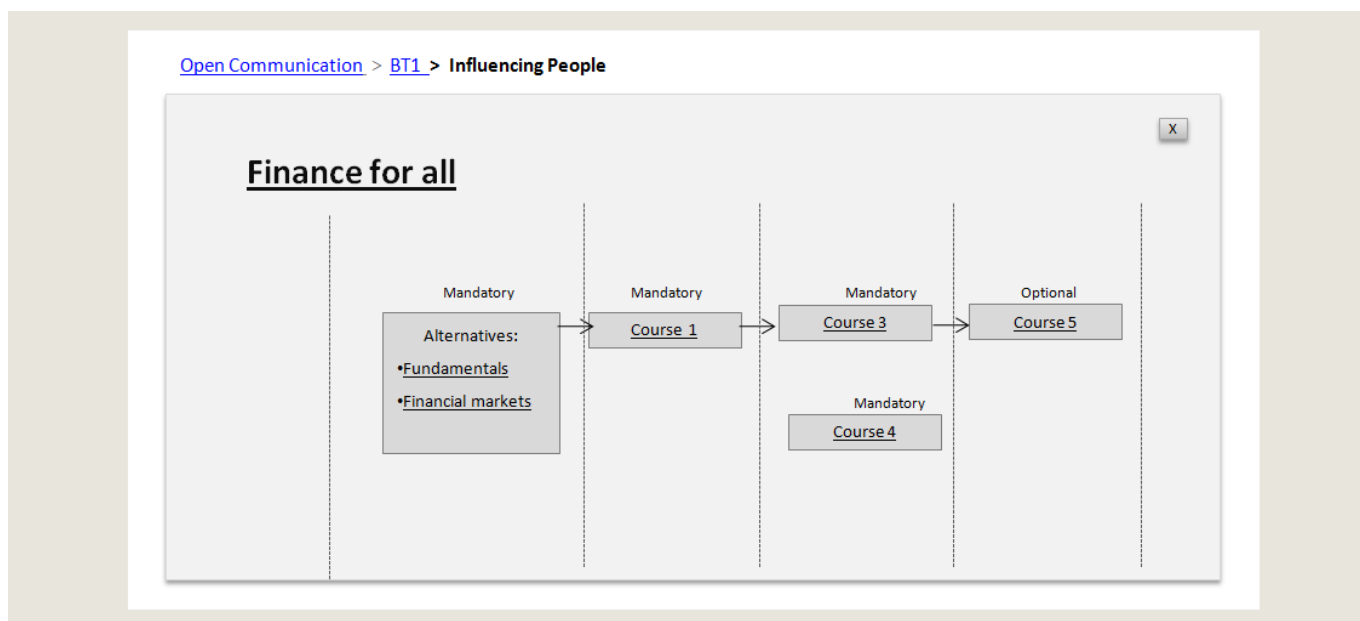
Let's translate this requirement in our language: there is a community 'X' in which all of its members also belong to community 'Y'. Community managers will be able to express just that in our back-end, adding to their community 'X' the prerequisite of belonging to another community 'Y'. They can then trust community 'Y' to manage that community well and focus on what is specific to their own community 'X'. Individual students will be part of both communities and can take their questions and suggestions to the right community instead of discussing them randomly with people that just happen to be around. Also as mentioned above, the principle of the backpack will work because if they want to add community 'Z' and community 'Z' also relies on community 'Y' then they will start in 'Z' with all progress they already made in 'Y'.

4.3 It should be Communities who manage Communities

We have discussed community managers and spokespersons as individuals who work on behalf of the community. This is purely because of technological and human limitations – the target should be to maximally loop back the community's interaction on a social medium towards what is defined as relevant within My PLE for its current and potential members.

Another complexity we have avoided above is precisely about communities relying on other communities, In order for one community to rely on another community, basic rules and expectations need to be established among community managers. You cannot define a "finance for all" community in a telecommunications company and then put in enough knowledge to manage a bank. There needs to be a clear taxonomy across all communities that want to allow reuse within and amongst them. This is where the learning institution has a role to play, to regulate traffic. In a corporate setting this will be about ensuring the right communities exist in line with the company's mission and objectives.

Figure 6. Taxonomies and Learning Paths are defined by the Communities



Many will maybe argue that putting learners and communities in control is just allowing things to get out of control. But as we argued above this is not the case because My PLE will award each of the actors precisely the right amount of control, The learning function will control which communities need to exist (e.g. in line with corporate objectives). The communities will decide what is relevant in each of them. The learners will progress in line with their personal goals and the goals they set together with their career coaches (their parents, people managers, ...). What is important is the result, to reach excellence and to have better performance individually and of the community. It are the people themselves who know better than anybody else when their work improves. The system flexibility and dynamism ensure that the learning is connected to the reality.

All of this represents a challenge because it requires us to think from a totally different angle: learner-centric and community-driven. So we need a liberating thought exploiting the basic dynamics of the system; from *The Great Marigold Hotel*: “In the end everything is all right. If it is not all right then we are not yet at the end.”

5. Data Privacy and Composite Identity

It is impossible to talk so much like we did about individuals and communities without going into data privacy.

My PLE taps into a lot of available, relevant personal data to allow personalization without requiring individuals to complete endless forms and check lists. To some extent, when an individual works in My PLE he leaves a trace of his identity (to which community he belongs and where he stands in regards to community expectations). It is crucial for students to feel ‘at home’ without being worried about failure and with the incentive to aspire to new communities without bearing the burden of explaining why.

Students need to be able to trust the privacy and personalization of the tool so that they can truly say: “It is My PLE.”

As a result, My Personal Learning Experience will have a strong control on data privacy. As a principle, all personal data is exclusively available to the student unless he decides to share some piece with specific others (peers, family, managers, recruiters, systems, databases, etc.). This principle of sharing is crucial because it allows at the same time to have a trustable environment whilst allowing people to boast about their achievements in a controlled way to the right audience (their community peers, their people managers, their recruiters, ...). This sharing can take different shapes, for instance sharing a badge that is representing an achievement on LinkedIn, and in so doing allows to integrate with existing performance management without importing the associated roles (e.g. that of a people manager) into My PLE.

At the same time My PLE will provide a wealth of statistical data to stakeholders, communities and even the general public. Answers to key questions: Which are the most popular communities? Which communities grow fastest? Is the community still growing in members or average progress? Which proofs of competence are hardest to deliver (and consequently where to target additional development of learning material)? The generation of reports of a strictly statistical nature will be a way to integrate with other business processes to help determine systemic actions to reinforce certain communities or resolve issues within communities.

Our privacy principle is even more important because of the principle of composite identity inherent in My PLE. Individuals can gain access to communities from the context of a certain enterprise, institution or even their chess club. Each of these contexts will give individuals access to relevant communities, but the individual will be able to bring everything together within his Personal Learning Experience. The fact that an individual pertains to multiple contexts is a defining characteristic (including his authentication within these various contacts) and it is crucial individuals trust the system not to spill all of their belongings to anybody, outside of their personal control.

6. Proofs of Competence

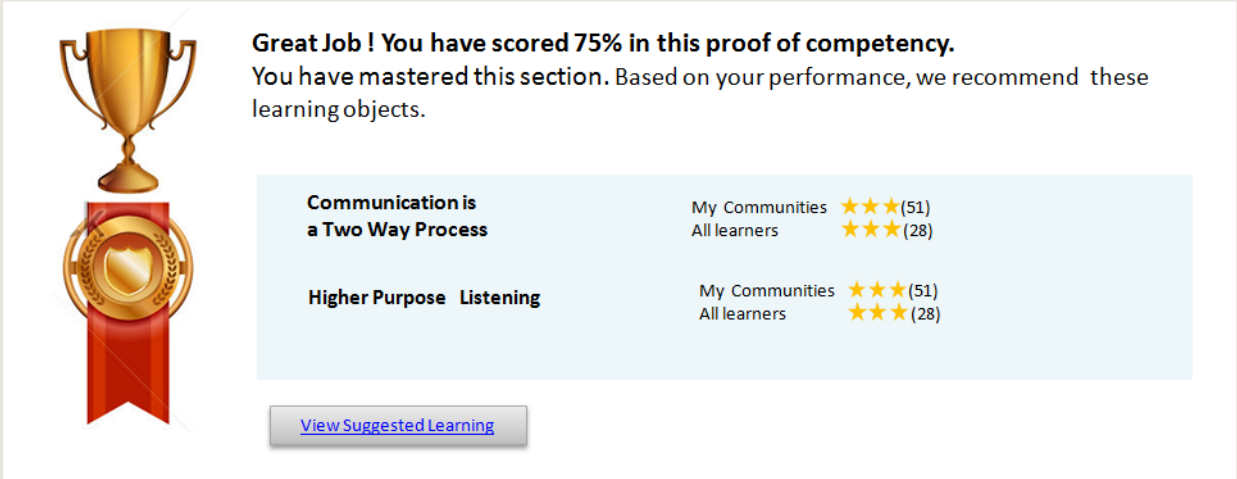
Another thing we glossed over above are the details of proof of competence. We wanted to focus first on the importance of the concept within the overall My Personal Learning Experience.

Obviously there are devils in these details. We need to make sure that these proofs of competence are there to help students decide what is relevant in their personal case. We also need to ensure that the progress indicator makes sense reflecting the actual progress with regards to the community expectations. This is the case when a student shares their progress, which becomes a piece of (semi-) public information and, as such, needs to make sense outside of their own context

These are not new tensions and we are not the experts on resolving it, so if you can help, let us know ;-).

The way we solve this in My PLE is by giving options (if you will we build the piano but it is up to the users to compose the music). Depending on the community context, you could make a simple repeatable quiz (or even allow the student to do a self-assessment) or define an import of grading from another system (e.g. a formal certification you have passed somewhere) or importing evidence (a degree obtained, an endorsement from a community expert, a jury review of something you did) or just an import of data as to whether or not you completed a certain class.

Figure 7. Quiz score



Great Job ! You have scored 75% in this proof of competency.
You have mastered this section. Based on your performance, we recommend these learning objects.

| | |
|---|--------------------------|
| Communication is a Two Way Process | My Communities ★★★★★(51) |
| | All learners ★★★★★(28) |
| Higher Purpose Listening | My Communities ★★★★★(51) |
| | All learners ★★★★★(28) |

[View Suggested Learning](#)

The main point here is that in My Personal Learning Experience you can both create native proof of competence items such as quizzes and can import them as well. If for some item you want to make sure a certain thing is protected against fraud or undersigned as credible by others, this can be done without compromising the personal nature of My Personal Learning Experience (because it refers to an item, not to the learner's over-all status, and because it is a specific action the learner decides to undertake).

This also allows to position My PLE with respect to traditional certifications and/or accreditations. The fact that a community is dynamic (and therefore goes beyond all static and semi-static certification, accreditation and examination records) allows for integrating the latter (if relevant and valuable in the community context) as (one of the) proofs of competence..

Within My Personal Learning Experience our motto is: "Don't protect against fraud, protect against boredom." Learning should be just as fun as a game and it should be just as self-defeating to trick learning as it is to trick a game. Sharing an achievement in My PLE can only make sense if you can really come up with the goods i.e. if you can talk to the peers in your community without being exposed as a fake.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this document we have discussed several key properties of My Personal Learning Experience and their impact on the evolving field of Learning. Key characteristics to keep in mind, which differentiate My PLE and enable it to provide unique, personalized learning experiences are as follows.

- My PLE provides an experience that's relevant to the individual. It allows students to be immersed and become part of communities. Through communities, and with the addition of social components, students can become experts and ultimately become teachers themselves, helping drive communities forward and advancing the common knowledge.
- My PLE puts the student in control. They decide how they want to learn, wherever they happen to be and on whatever device they may have. My PLE is, however, not a one-size-fits all. The experience is dynamic and customizable and the expertise has to be proven to a living and evolving community of peers.
- We have interlaced our discussion with samples of the My PLE front- and back-end applications. We will leave going into the actual SW solution for another day. The key concepts in that solution will be to provide Personal Learning as a Service, to provide a way for learning content providers to have a place where they can make their stuff available to various communities, a Personal Learning eXchange. The key pillars won't surprise readers of this document; they have to do with relevance, social learning and an immersive experience.

So please provide your feedback on this paper going to My PLE facebook page by [clicking here](#) such that we can co-create our solution with prospective users. We hope we made you curious enough to stay tuned.